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ABSTRACT

The new social studies of childhood point to the need for studies which explore young people's uses of technology. Multiplayer computer games provide an important site for exploring the role of new technologies in young people's lives, in particular in relation to issues of representation, identity, and community, and to the changing nature of literacy and textuality in these multimodal texts. This paper reports on a small study of six teenage players of multiplayer computer games. Five boys and one girl aged 15-16 were interviewed individually about their game playing practices and preferences, and filmed as they played online. The study focused on issues of representation and community online, the experience of playing online and on intersections between traditional print-based text, visual images, symbols, sound, interactivity, and other elements as these young people played the games. (Contains 14 references.) (PM)

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Catherine Beavis, Deakin University

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RTS and RPGs: New Literacies and Multiplayer computer games

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Multiplayer games: literacy, community, identity.

The new social studies of childhood point to the need for studies which explore young people's uses of technology: studies which 'focus on the everyday spaces in and through which children's lives and identities are made and remade' and on the ways in which young people 'utilize the material presence of technologies in their every day lives' (Holloway and Valentine 2000: 770). At the same time, studies into the (new)/(multi) literacies associated with the emergence of new technologies seek to identify and describe the ways in which literacy may be changing or reconfigured in our interaction with new media. Multiplayer computer games provide an important site for exploring the role of new technologies in young people's lives, in particular in relation to issues of representation, identity, and community, and to the changing nature of literacy and textuality in these multimodal texts.

In this paper, I report on a small study of 6 teenage players of multiplayer computer games. Five boys and one girl aged 15-16 were interviewed individually about their game playing practices and preferences, and filmed as they played on line. The study focussed on issues of representation and community online, the experience of playing online and on intersections between traditional print-based text, visual images, symbols, sound, interactivity and other elements as these young people played the games.

Community and identity online

As has long been noted, the Internet has far-reaching implications for how we shape and understand identity and community - 'changing the way we think, the nature of our sexuality, the form of our communities, our very identities' (Turkle 1995: 9). For game players, cyberspace provides the forum and opportunity for communal engagement with other players around the common ground of the known text, the chosen game.

Players engage both individually and collectively, as opponents or as partners, in game play. To do so, great care is taken with the ways they present themselves online. A player needs to demonstrate both skill and desirability as a partner or worthy opponent. Unlike most chat sites, where there are few limits on the construction of a persona, and language is the primary medium through which presentation and communication take place, in the case of games, identities can not so be so readily assumed and occupied. Players quickly learn that they are assessed and evaluated not just through the ways they conduct and present themselves in speech, but more importantly, through the ways they play.

Displaying Expertise

Expertise and authority in the specific game must be displayed. Game play itself becomes a site for performativity, an '"arena of action" in which to manifest and organize displays of social competence' (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis 2001: 2). Expertise is demonstrated through skill, experience and knowledge of the game, and through other demonstrations of authority, such as rankings or reputation. This works in counterpoint to the verbal interaction in individual games and in the related forums. Players demonstrate understandings and abilities in the game itself, giving authority to the postures and positions taken up verbally or alternatively showing up exaggerations or inflated claims. Within game forums, as in verbal interaction within the games, the language used, and even the amount of chat, mark out initiates from 'newbies'.

Establishing oneself as authoritative

Establishing oneself as authoritative involves a number of dimensions.

Just as in the physical world, factors here included not just demonstrated skills at the game, but also social positioning, acceptance by the right people, being seen in the right company. One student, James, set out to impress people he regarded as influential. One strategy for doing so was to achieve high skill levels by playing the game in its stand-alone, one-player form before launching himself online, so that he came in already with considerable expertise. Another was to find ways to charm and challenge players whose respect he wanted to earn, through the combined medium of language and his skill at the game. A third was to demonstrate shared values and solidarity, again through the way the game was played and through discussion on the forums and chat sites.

Building and managing relationships

Not only was the capacity both to excite and win over desirable opponents important, so too were the linguistically mediated social skills to smooth over hurt and defeat. Pre- and post-gaming chatsite interludes were an integral part of the construction and mending of relationships and of the maintenance of acceptance and position within the online community:

The presentation of self

The presentation of self, and, in James' phrase, 'your place in this food chain', depends also on the ways in which the particular player interprets and responds to others online. Paralleling the verbal and skills-based presentation of self is the need to find ways to identify and assess those who are presenting themselves to other players. Reading others is the exact counterpart to presenting a self to be read. Skills of interpretation and deconstruction are as important as those of representation. Just as players like James seek to convey an image of themselves as desirable, authoritative and just players, so too they need to be able to identify and make judgements about others who present themselves to them. Here, as earlier, impressions are almost totally mediated through language and through intimate knowledge of the game - how it is played, skill levels, and demonstrated actual knowledge. The capacity to make these judgements is fundamental to effective game playing and participation in the community. Judgements arise primarily in relation to four key areas: identifying opponents' skill levels, choosing partners, recognizing authorities and identifying cheats.

Highly skilled players are recognized for their experience and expertise (as James observed 'that would make an influential person in any field'), and also for the roles they may occupy in the meta-level world that surrounds most games in the game and chat forums online. These include recruiting and leading teams or clans from the range of players online, or acting as regulators of the game. Helping others and providing new information on game chat sites also provide mechanisms for influential players to maintain their position, while furthering the game and increasing less experienced players' respect for them.

Regulating the game

Identifying cheats and hackers is particularly important. Their actions range from undermining the pleasure of the game to doing material harm to players through accessing their accounts or passwords or entering into dubious financial deals, for example, selling games weapons for real money online. What counts as lawful is a matter of considerable debate. The maverick, frontier nature of cyberspace is reflected both in the anarchic and incessant development of new forms of 'cheats' and in the ways in which such matters are negotiated and pronounced upon in games forums. In a compelling instance of language as social practice, through such debates, rules and parameters are established, tested and stretched. Both the rules and the community are evolving and entrepreneurial, but at the same time monitored and regulated by the huge numbers of online contributors and those appointed by games makers and by their peers as regulators for the site.

Reading and playing games

The young people in this study were expert players of games. In the study, the games played were *Baldur's Gate II*, *Yuri's Revenge*, *Red Alert 2*, *Counterstrike Age of Empires 2*.They encompassed Role Playing Fantasy, Real Time Strategy and First Person Shooter games. In their game playing, players moved between old and new genres, print, visual, aural and other forms, and static and moving images. They attended to multiple still and moving images, and to gesture, color, icons and sound, and drew on a range of textual and intertextual knowledge relating both to the narrative and to the genre of game. Central elements entailed in reading and playing games included segmented screens, talk, colour, dimensionality and sound.

Segmented screens

As Bolter and Grusin (2002) observe, players are required to look both at and through the screen. Games used in the study all feature segmented screens. The animated action of the game occupied the largest, central section of the screen, with supplementary information supplied in icons in separate sections down the side and sometimes beneath the screen. Icons down the side can be clicked to provide additional information or provide access to related screens. In other instances, changes in shape or color indicate the changing status of elements of the game such as health or availability. All games require players to mediate and move between these icons and the animated game play, and in the case of *Baldur's*, and others of that genre, to attend also to the text options presented to players by game characters. The students moved between these different information sets with ease, attending also to nonpictorial elements such as sound, and additional visual triggers in the game.

Talk

In some games, such as *Baldur's Gate II*, space underneath the central section provides for dialogue options integral to the progression of the game. These take the form of multiple-choice questions and responses between characters. Choice of answers relate both to the action to be taken and to the personality of game characters and the relationships between them. Provision for typing in additional chat between players represents a second set of dialogue options in most games. This additional chat serves a number of functions, and unlike the game directed options just described, is entirely controlled by players.

Color

In addition to its central role in creating the immersive world of the game, color works more specifically to signify options and possibilities, and contributes to the construction of character. In *Baldur's Gate*, colored circles around the feet of characters indicate whether the character is friendly, hostile or neutral (green, red and blue). Other color-based cues include blue highlighting of objects to indicate that interactivity is possible (*Baldur's Gate*) or the appropriateness or otherwise of a possible site on which to build

(*Red Alert II*). It can also be important in creating personalities and the representation of self. In *Baldur's Gate*, for example, the creation of characters requires a range of choices and the selection of attributes, including skin and clothing color as well as weaponry, gender, role and race.

Dimensionality

In some games, spatial information is also extremely useful. In *Counterstrike*, knowing the map, or layout of the game, helps players anticipate traps and danger, know where to 'camp' or where others might be camping, know when to shoot and when to risk being seen (see also Gee 2001In the strategy games, *Red Alert II*, and its extension, *Yuri's Revenge*, maps show the layout of the game, as far as it's been explored, and potentially at least the location of the enemy, which may or may not be obscured by the 'fog of war'.

Sound

Sound is important in a number of ways. Sound is used to signal activity, accentuate action and provide information (for example, the steady stream of 'unit complete' statements that accompanies building in *Red Alert II* and *Yuri's Revenge*.) It also seems of key importance in creating realism and intensifying the immersive feeling of the game. In *Baldur's Gate*, for example, player choose how they wish their character to sound when he or she speaks, from a range of options, while accents and emphasis from characters that are fixed features of the game also contribute to the nuanced feeling of the narrative. A steady drumbeat and stream of military orders underlies *Red Alert II* and *Yuri's Revenge*, while *Baldur's Gate* is punctuated by periodic utterances and demands. Sound is an important element in the movie clips that introduce and mark stages in the game. In *Baldur's Gate*, for example, music, the roar of flames, the scratch of pen on paper, the beat of rain and the somber voice of the narrator all contribute to the portentous sense of doom in the movie clip that introduce the game and make links to what has gone before.

Conclusion

Online computer games immerse young people in highly complex and engaging worlds; worlds in which literacy and communicative practices are significantly reconfigured and extended by the contexts in which they occur. As Nixon notes, participation in global popular media culture, including online culture, has become integrally bound up with children's and teenagers' affiliations, identities and pleasures.' (Nixon, in press). As textual practice, computer game playing shares with other literacy occasions real-world social and cultural contexts and ideologies, purposes and effects.

Further, multiplayer computer games show the possibilities and affordances (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001) offered by online technology. As such, they provide the opportunity to explore the use and development of multimodal literacies, in the real and evolving contexts of design and play. It is not just new images that are created, but new forms of narrative and interactivity, and new literacy practices amongst players. Games' incorporation of a wide range of semiotic forms and modes provide quintessential

instances of the expansion of meaning making to include a range of visual and nonprint visual, aural and interactive representational forms. If we are to learn more about the ways in which literacy is reshaped in the context of ICTs, and the nature and implications of young people's immersion in online culture, we can learn much by studying multiplayer computer games and game communities.

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